

Ghost in the palace

#Chapter 11: heaven judgement - Read Ghost in the palace Chapter 11: heaven judgement

Chapter 11: heaven judgement

The Hall of Clear Sound held its breath.

Four great braziers burned at the altar's corners, each flame fed with sacred incense. The smoke curled upward like threads of silk, but not all rose clean. From the east brazier, the smoke dragged heavy, clinging low to the ground before crawling sluggishly upward.

The court stirred uneasily.

"Why does the east smoke falter?" a minister whispered.

"It hesitates," another replied. "An omen... perhaps Heaven already speaks."

"A warning," muttered a third, eyes darting toward Ananya.

Lady Chen lowered her lashes, a faint smile tugging her painted lips as she hid behind her fan.

Grand Eunuch Gao stepped forward, his staff striking stone with a sound that cracked like thunder. "The Queen Consort Lian shall submit to Heaven's trial. Let none say her fate was decided by man's tongue alone."

All eyes turned to Ananya.

She stepped forward, robes of white trailing across the stone floor, her hair pinned high with a single jade piece. The hall's air pressed heavy, but her gaze was calm, steady.

"Mother of the Empire," she said, bowing toward the Dowager. Then her eyes lifted to the Emperor. "Your Majesty. Ministers of the court, gathered concubines. I will not plead with excuses. If I am tainted, then Heaven will mark me. If I am clean, then Heaven itself will defend me."

A ripple passed through the crowd. Some concubines smirked, certain of her downfall. Others watched with dawning unease.

An attendant brought forth the great bowl of water, carried from the ancestral well of the Duke's manor. The purity mirror loomed behind it, polished until its surface gleamed like still water.

Ananya dipped her wide sleeve into the bowl until silk clung heavy and wet to her arm. Slowly, she lifted it high for all to see.

"If corruption clings to me, the smoke will bind itself to this cloth," she declared. "If not, let Heaven show the truth."

The hall leaned forward as she approached the first brazier.

At the north, the smoke bent away, drifting aside as if repelled.

At the south, it curved back, avoiding her.

At the west, it rose straight and pure, unbothered.

But at the east brazier, the smoke twisted violently. Instead of reaching toward her sleeve, it recoiled as though burned, curling backward. Then, as if alive, it slid toward the trembling maid who had been brought forth as witness.

The girl shrieked, stumbling back, waving her hands helplessly as the smoke clung to her face, her arms, her clothes.

Gasps tore through the court.

"Heaven rejects her!"

"It's not the Queen Consort—"

"The smoke clings to the maid!"

Ministers muttered, concubines paled, fans snapped shut in shock. Even the Dowager's expression shifted, faint surprise breaking through her frost.

Lady Chen's grip on her fan tightened until the ribs cracked.

Wei Rong's laughter barked out in Ananya's ear, unheard by the rest. "Ha! Even Heaven spits their lies back at them!"

Fen Yu clapped her hands, spinning in joy. "She's winning! They can't deny it now!"

Li Shen's calm voice brushed her shoulder. "You gave them sight where they sought blindness. Elegant."

The Emperor rose.

The rustle of his dark robes filled the silence as he descended the steps, each movement slow, deliberate, inevitable. He crouched by the east brazier, his hand hovering just above the rim. A faint shimmer of residue glinted against the ash.

He lifted the brazier's lid, inspecting the powder within. His gaze sharpened.

"Bring the storeroom casket," he commanded.

Two eunuchs rushed forward, carrying the sealed wooden chest from the incense stores. Grand Eunuch Gao cut the wax threads and drew out the powder packet. The knot tied at its mouth was not the intricate temple knotting but the simple loop of the women's quarters.

The sight drew a shiver through the gathered court.

"Impossible..." one minister breathed.

"The incense was corrupted."

"Who dares—?"

The Emperor straightened, his gaze sweeping across the hall before fixing on the head matron. His voice was quiet, yet cut like a drawn blade.

"You hold the keys to Heaven's stores," he said. "Explain."

The matron bowed low, her composure cracking for the first time. "Your Majesty, the stores are vast. Many hands touch them. It may have been switched without my knowing."

Gao's eyes narrowed. He reached into his sleeve and drew out a second key, identical to the storeroom's lock. "And yet this key was found hidden in your sash."

The court erupted.

"Two keys?"

"She had access all along!"

"Heaven's altar was corrupted by her hand!"

Ananya lowered her wet sleeve, her gaze calm but unyielding.

"If my strangeness is honesty, let Heaven itself be my witness," she said, her voice ringing through the hall. "I do not fear its light."

The purity mirror shimmered behind her. For a moment, its surface rippled as though touched by sunlit water — then shone bright, unclouded.

The Dowager leaned forward, eyes narrowing. For the first time in years, warmth touched her voice. "Heaven's mirror shines clean. The Queen Consort is not tainted."

Gao struck his staff against stone. "So recorded."

The hall burst into noise.

Some ministers applauded, others whispered in dismay. The Lian family fell to their knees. Duke Lian's forehead pressed against the cold stone. "Heaven guards truth," he whispered. Lady Xiu wept openly, tears streaking her painted cheeks, while Lian Hua clutched her sleeve, sobbing with relief.

Lady Chen's nails dug into her fan until blood welled beneath the lacquer. Her smile was gone, her eyes dark and sharp.

Ananya stood in the smoke, her white robes billowing like snow, her chin lifted. For the first time since entering the palace, she felt the court look at her not with suspicion — but with awe.

And above her, three unseen shadows hovered proudly, their loyalty unbroken.

Chapter 12: shadow behind the lie

The echo of the purity mirror's glow had barely faded when the hall cracked under a new sound — the sharp crack of a forehead against stone.

The maid who had testified against Consort Lian collapsed to her knees, her thin frame shaking like a reed in the wind.

"Spare me! Please, spare me!" she sobbed, banging her head again until crimson beads dotted the floor. Her voice broke into wails that tore through the heavy silence. "I—I never meant to accuse Her Highness! I had no choice!"

The Dowager's eyes narrowed, her voice as sharp as ice. "No choice? Speak clearly, girl."

The maid's shoulders convulsed. She raised her tear-streaked face, eyes swollen with terror. "A man came to me — his face was hidden, his robe plain. He... he knew me. He knew my name, my husband's work, even where my child slept. He said—he said if I did not say those words, if I did not claim the Queen Consort gave a handkerchief to a merchant, he would kill my husband and child!"

Gasps burst through the chamber.

"By Heaven..."

"A masked man?"

"So it was coercion!"

The ministers leaned toward one another, whispers like rising thunder.

"Someone dares threaten families of servants?"

"Inside the palace walls... this reeks of conspiracy."

"A faction with such reach is dangerous."

The Emperor rose from his throne, his dark gaze falling on the maid like a blade.

"Describe him."

The maid shook violently, pressing her palms to the floor. "I could not see his face! He wore plain cloth, no ornament, but his voice... steady, cold. He told me every word to speak. He warned me — if I faltered, if I spoke his name, my family would die."

Her sobs cracked into silence, then into desperate pleas.

"I swear upon my life, I never saw Her Highness dishonor herself. I only obeyed to protect my family. Please... please spare them."

Wei Rong snarled, his fists clenching. "A dog's trick! Using a woman's family as a knife."

Fen Yu's eyes brimmed with tears, her voice trembling. "She wasn't evil... she was forced! Oh, Ananya, what kind of monsters would—"

Li Shen's face was calm, but his voice was grave. "This is no petty jealousy. This is organized. A hand bold enough to reach into the Duke's household and bind even its maids with fear."

The Dowager slowly lowered her fan, her lips pressed thin. "So another hand moves in shadow. A hand that dares to strike at the Queen Consort's honor through threats and masks."

Concubines exchanged uneasy glances. Lady Zhen's painted lips curled in disdain. "How convenient," she whispered to the woman beside her. "A maid always weeps when truth corners her."

But the woman beside her only shook her head, pale with unease.

The Emperor lifted a hand, and silence fell sharp as thunder. His voice was low, but each word rang clear.

"Send guards to the maid's home. Bring her husband and child under watch — protect them well. No family shall suffer for truth."

He turned to the ministers, his gaze like steel. "And seek the man in the mask. If a faction has such reach, then it threatens not only the Queen Consort — it threatens the throne itself."

The court bowed low, murmuring assent.

Lady Chen lowered her eyes quickly, but her fingers dug into the ribs of her fan until blood welled beneath the lacquer. She had been so certain. A clean rumor, an obedient maid. But the girl had cracked too soon.

Her painted smile returned faintly, a mask upon a mask. So the maid was weak. Next time, the chain will be stronger. The blade sharper.

Ananya stood at the center of it all, the smoke still curling faintly around her, her wet sleeve heavy in her hand.

The maid's words echoed in her chest, chilling her more than the cold floor. A masked man. A hidden faction. Someone moving boldly enough to weave her downfall not with jealousy, but with strategy.

She lifted her chin, her eyes calm but hard.

So this is not just a fight for dignity. It is war, hidden in whispers.

And though she felt the Emperor's gaze upon her — longer, steadier than before — she did not flinch.

For the first time, she realized: she was not only fighting for herself. She was standing at the edge of something larger, darker, and far more dangerous.

Chapter 13: restored white

The vast Hall of Clear Sound was still trembling with the weight of revelation. Incense smoke curled in thin threads, fading like the lies it had burned away. The maid's confession hung in the air, shattering the accusations that had dragged Consort Lian into judgment.

All eyes turned to the throne.

The Emperor rose slowly, his dark robes trailing like storm clouds. His voice rang clear, heavy with authority.

"The Queen Consort has stood before Heaven's trial. The mirror shines clean. The smoke rejected her, and it marked another. She is innocent."

His gaze swept the court, sharp as a drawn blade. "From this moment, let no tongue call her tainted. Her confiscated goods shall be returned at once. And hear me well—this court will not rest until the masked hand behind this deception is found and cut away."

The words fell like thunder. Ministers bent low, voices echoing: "Yes, Your Majesty."

Ananya stood in the center, her wet sleeve dripping faintly onto stone. The cold clung to her, yet her spine was straight, her gaze unwavering. For the first time since she entered the palace, she felt not hunted, but seen.

Behind her veil of silence, her companions stirred.

Wei Rong's grin split wide, fierce and triumphant. "Did you hear that? Innocent! Before the whole cursed court!"

Fen Yu twirled with joy, her tears sparkling. "You did it, Ananya! Even Heaven stood at your side!"

Li Shen's voice was quiet, warm. "Not Heaven, not chance. It was her dignity that carried her. That is what they cannot bury."

Ananya's lips curved faintly — the barest hint of a smile.

Then movement broke the hall. Duke Lian, who had stood silent until now, stepped forward. His old knees bent, his hands pressed to the cold stone as he bowed low.

"Your Majesty. Mother of the Empire." His voice trembled, but each word struck like a hammer. "Today, my daughter was dragged into this hall as if she were a criminal. Before the eyes of the Empire, her honor was smeared with lies. She has proven her innocence, yet words once spoken stain more deeply than blood. For the sake of fairness, for the dignity of this throne itself—this old subject begs that my daughter be granted an apology."

Gasps exploded through the chamber.

"An apology?"

"From the throne itself?"

"Bold... reckless even."

Some ministers frowned, whispering among themselves. "The Duke oversteps."

But others murmured agreement. "He speaks truth. Her innocence must not only be proven—it must be respected."

All eyes turned to the Emperor and the Dowager.

The Dowager's fan lowered, resting against her lap. Her eyes, cold as winter frost, lingered on Ananya's white figure in the smoke. For a long, heavy silence, she said nothing. Then, finally, her voice emerged — cool, measured, but lacking its usual edge.

"Heaven has spoken. The Queen Consort stands clean. Let that be her shield, brighter than apology. As for words spoken in haste—let them be forgotten in the light of truth."

A concession, subtle but unmistakable. The Dowager rarely softened her words — and this was as close as she would ever come to bowing.

The Emperor, however, did not remain still. His eyes turned to Ananya, lingering longer than duty required. His voice was deep, resonant, and carried to every corner.

"The Duke's words bear weight. The Queen Consort's name was dragged into mud unjustly. Though no court can wash away whispers entirely, let all present hear this: the throne recognizes her dignity. She stands not accused, but vindicated."

His gaze sharpened, sweeping the assembly. "Let any who dare speak otherwise know this: to slander her now is to defy Heaven's judgment and the will of the Emperor."

The chamber bowed low in unison. "Yes, Your Majesty!"

The Duke's shoulders shook with restrained sobs, his forehead pressing into the floor. "This subject... thanks Your Majesty. Thanks Heaven. Thanks the ancestors."

Lady Xiu wept openly, her handkerchief soaked, her eyes never leaving her daughter. Lian Hua clutched her sleeve, her young face glowing with relief and pride.

But not all shared joy.

Lady Chen's hand tightened until her lacquered nails pierced her skin. Her fan snapped with a soft crack, hidden beneath her sleeve. Her smile was brittle, painted on with perfect skill, but her heart raced.

So he shields her now... even speaks in her defense. I underestimated the girl.

Her lashes lowered, concealing the storm in her gaze. Very well. If Heaven protects her, then I will sharpen the knife that Heaven cannot see.

Ananya inhaled slowly, her chest tight but not with fear. For so long she had felt alone, a stranger in this body, an intruder in this palace. But today—her father's voice, her ghosts' loyalty, and even the Emperor's decree had formed a shield around her.

Her wet sleeve weighed heavy, but her spirit had never felt lighter.

In her white robe, she stood radiant — not as an accused, but as a woman vindicated before Heaven and Earth.

Chapter 14: lady's chen

The lanterns of Emerald Pavilion burned deep into the night. The snow-white curtains rippled faintly as a cold wind slipped through the lattices, but inside, the air was thick with rage.

Lady Chen stood before her bronze mirror, her reflection warped by the trembling candlelight. Her jeweled fan, snapped during the Purity Rite, lay broken on the table. She seized it in one hand, twisting until splinters of lacquer pierced her skin.

"Luck," she hissed, her voice trembling with fury. "That wretched girl survived only by Heaven's whim. A trembling maid dares ruin everything I prepared. One word of weakness, and the Emperor himself shielded her!"

She threw the fan aside with a clatter, pacing across the embroidered carpets. Her silken sleeves fluttered like flames, her eyes glinting with venom.

Her maid, Xiao Tao, dropped to her knees, carefully gathering the scattered hairpins that Lady Chen had torn from her head. "My Lady," she whispered timidly, "you must calm yourself. His Majesty—he still visits you, still favors you. Perhaps—"

Lady Chen spun, her sleeve striking the air. "Favors me?" she laughed, sharp and bitter. "Tell me, Xiao Tao, when did he last defend me before the court? When did he raise his voice for me as he did for her today? Never. Never once!"

She stopped before the mirror again, her painted lips curving into a cold smile.

"I have danced for him, sung for him, wept before him, and still he keeps me at arm's length. But today, for that naive little girl, he broke his silence. Today, ministers and concubines alike saw him stand at her side."

Her nails scraped across the wooden frame of the mirror. "Do you understand what that means? They will begin to whisper of her. They will say Heaven protects her. They will say the Emperor looks upon her with favor."

Xiao Tao bowed low, her forehead pressing against the floor. "My Lady, then what shall we do?"

Lady Chen's eyes softened, but only with cunning. She pressed her palm against her flat stomach, the gesture almost tender.

"What binds a man stronger than schemes, stronger than Heaven's judgment?" she murmured.

The maid looked up, uncertain. "My Lady?"

"A child." Lady Chen's voice sharpened, filled with steel. "If I give him a son, no court will dare slight me. Even the Dowager must bow to the mother of the heir. That girl may have her innocence, her 'purity' — but what is snow against the fire of bloodline?"

Xiao Tao froze, fear dawning in her eyes. "A... child. But—what if His Majesty does not... if he does not come to you, My Lady—"

Lady Chen's laugh was low, dangerous, almost tender. "Then I will make him come."

Her gaze darkened. "There are powders and elixirs known only to the southern merchants. Fragrances that cloud a man's judgment. Drinks that stir his blood. Seduction poisons. With them, even the coldest heart will burn."

Xiao Tao paled. "Seduction poison...? My Lady, if it were discovered, the punishment would be death. Not only for you, but for all of us."

The sharp sound of a slap cracked through the chamber.

Lady Chen stood over her maid, her hand trembling from the strike. "If it is discovered, we die. But if not—" she leaned close, her eyes glittering with fire, "—then I will live as the mother of the Crown Prince. Which fate do you prefer, Xiao Tao?"

The girl shook, tears welling, but bowed her head. "I... I will obey."

"Good." Lady Chen straightened, her voice cold and commanding. "Tomorrow, you will leave the palace at dawn. Slip through the side gate, go to the southern quarter, and find our contact. He will provide the powders I require. Do not fail me."

"Yes, My Lady," Xiao Tao whispered, trembling.

Lady Chen turned back to her mirror, her reflection smiling faintly, cruelly. She traced her lips with a fingertip, admiring the crimson stain.

"Let them praise her purity tonight," she whispered to herself. "Let them admire her snow-white robes. Soon, His Majesty will not leave my chambers. Soon, I will hold his child. And then—let us see if she dares to stand in my shadow."

The candlelight flickered, stretching her smile into something both beautiful and terrifying.

Outside, the wind howled faintly, carrying the secret of her ambition into the darkness.

Chapter 15: collision

The morning sun stretched pale across the palace roofs, glinting off golden tiles as if the heavens themselves had washed the world clean after the storm of yesterday's trial.

In Phoenix Hall, Ananya rose with quiet determination. Though her body still carried the exhaustion of the Purity Rite, her mind was clear. The memory of her father's trembling voice, her mother's tears, and her sister's bright smile echoed within her chest.

"I must see them," she whispered to herself. "Just three days. Three days with my natal family."

She smoothed the folds of her robe and stepped out into the corridor.

Her shadows drifted close. Wei Rong yawned as he stretched lazily, his translucent form sharpening. "About time you thought of leaving this cage. I was beginning to feel like a prisoner myself."

Fen Yu floated beside her, excitement sparkling in her eyes. "Maybe your mother will make sweet rice cakes again! She always gave me extra last time."

Li Shen adjusted his sleeves with his usual calm. "You forget—you cannot taste them."

Fen Yu pouted. "Then I will watch her eat mine. It is the same."

Their chatter lifted Ananya's heart. A smile ghosted across her lips—until she turned a corner and nearly stumbled into him.

The Emperor.

He halted, dark robes brushing the stone, his tall frame casting a shadow across the corridor. The faint sandalwood of his presence curled through the air, heavy, inescapable. His gaze, sharp and cold, fell upon her.

For a heartbeat, neither moved. The silence deepened, broken only by the flutter of distant banners.

Ananya steadied herself and lowered in a bow. "Your Majesty."

His eyes narrowed. "The Queen Consort seems in great haste. Where does she hurry so early in the day?"

Her lips curved faintly, though her tone remained respectful. "To seek the Dowager's permission."

One dark brow lifted. "Permission? For what matter?"

"To return to my natal home," she answered smoothly. "Surely, a daughter may see her family now that her honor is no longer questioned."

The words were calm, but beneath their politeness lay a blade.

Wei Rong grinned broadly. "Oh, she's poking him straight in the ribs."

Fen Yu flapped her hands nervously. "Don't tease the dragon, don't tease the dragon—"

Li Shen's voice was low, thoughtful. "He asked. She replied. Nothing improper in truth."

The Emperor's lips pressed thin. "So quick to speak of honor," he said coldly. "Should not a wife first serve the Emperor's household before longing for her own?"

Ananya raised her head, her gaze unflinching. "A wife serves her husband's house best when her own house stands proud beside it. Or—" her voice sharpened, quiet yet clear, "—would Your Majesty prefer his Queen Consort bow before him with shame in her eyes?"

The corridor stilled. A passing eunuch froze mid-step, eyes lowering quickly as though afraid to breathe. Even the banners seemed to hold their sway.

The Emperor's gaze darkened. For a moment, it seemed he might rebuke her—yet he did not. Instead, his expression shifted, unreadable, the faintest flicker of curiosity breaking through his ice.

"You speak boldly."

Ananya dipped her head again, her tone steady. "I speak only what is true."

He stepped closer, his robe whispering across the stone, his shadow falling over her. His voice dropped low, so only she could hear.

"Do not mistake Heaven's favor for a shield you may wield at will."

Her heart beat faster, but she did not step back. Her own voice came quiet but sharp, her eyes locking with his. "And do not mistake silence for weakness, Your Majesty. Heaven gave me breath another day—I will not waste it trembling in fear."

For a long heartbeat, their eyes clashed—ice against flame, authority against defiance.

Wei Rong let out a bark of laughter. "By the ancestors, she taunted him! Did you see? She actually taunted the Emperor!"

Fen Yu covered her mouth, giggling despite herself. "I thought she'd faint, or he'd order her head struck off!"

Li Shen's gaze softened with something like pride. "No. He will remember her words. That will weigh on him more than any silence could."

The Emperor's expression shifted once more—hard to read, shadowed with something beyond anger. He turned sharply, his robe sweeping against the stone as he walked past her. The faint scent of sandalwood lingered where he had been.

Ananya exhaled slowly, her fingers tightening on her sleeve. Her heart still raced, but her spine remained straight.

She whispered to herself, "I will see my family. No matter whose shadow I walk under, I will not bow in shame."

Behind her, three unseen companions followed, their whispers carrying faint laughter.

And in the stillness of the corridor, the weight of their clash lingered like a storm that had yet to break.

Chapter 16: waiting

The Phoenix Pavilion towered above the palace courtyards, its vermilion pillars carved with dragons and phoenixes, its eaves glittering with gold tiles that caught the morning sun. Few dared enter this place lightly — it was the heart of power, the seat of the Dowager Empress, where even the Emperor himself often chose his words with care.

Ananya walked with steady steps across the wide stone path, her pale robe trailing behind her. The air was colder here, as though the walls themselves carried judgment.

At the gates, eunuchs bowed deeply. "Her Majesty the Queen Consort has arrived."

But no summons came.

Instead, she was guided into a side hall with plain walls, where a maid placed a single cup of tea before her and retreated. The silence pressed down like stone.

Minutes trickled into half an hour. The brazier hissed faintly. The tea grew lukewarm.

Wei Rong's temper flared first. He prowled the length of the room, his translucent form pacing like a caged beast. "She knows you're here. She makes you wait like some beggar at the gates. If I were flesh, I'd kick down her doors."

Fen Yu perched on the table, swinging her legs, her cheeks puffed in annoyance. "I'd tip this tea all over her silk rugs! Let her wait for once!"

Li Shen leaned against a pillar, his calm unbroken. "This is a test. She measures how long you can endure her silence. Lose patience, and she wins. Endure, and you rise."

Ananya lifted the teacup, sipping the cooled liquid slowly, her gaze steady. "If I cannot sit quietly here, how will I endure in this palace where every corridor holds sharper blades than swords?"

Her words silenced even Wei Rong.

The rustle of silk broke the stillness. A cluster of concubines swept past the open doorway, their laughter low, sharp as needles.

One, draped in pale green, tilted her chin. "So the purified snow sits outside the Phoenix Throne. Still waiting?"

Another hid her smile behind a jeweled fan. "Heaven may favor her, but the Dowager? Hm. Snow melts quickly under the summer sun."

The group giggled softly as they passed, their perfume lingering in the air.

Wei Rong snarled. "I'll spill ink on their painted faces!"

Fen Yu hopped up, eyes bright with mischief. "Or trip them over their skirts. Imagine them falling flat in front of the guards!"

Ananya placed her cup down gently. Her voice was calm. "Let them laugh. Words vanish like smoke. If I give them my anger, they will linger longer than their whispers."

Li Shen's lips curved faintly. "Spoken like one who has learned quickly."

An hour became two.

Finally, the inner curtains stirred. A eunuch's voice rang out. "Her Majesty the Dowager Empress summons the Queen Consort."

Ananya rose. She smoothed her robe and walked into the Phoenix Hall, her steps even, her expression composed.

The hall was vast, lined with towering pillars carved with phoenixes rising through clouds. At the far end sat the Dowager Empress, her robes of gold and scarlet draped heavily around her, her headdress gleaming with pearls.

Her face was carved from ice, her eyes sharp, watching Ananya approach.

Ananya sank into a deep bow, her forehead touching the cold floor. "This daughter-in-law greets the Mother of the Empire."

No answer came.

The Dowager lifted her teacup, sipping slowly. The sound of porcelain against jade filled the silence. She set it down with deliberate care, ignoring the young woman still kneeling before her.

Wei Rong growled. "Old viper. She makes you kneel like a servant."

Fen Yu clenched her fists. "Say something, Ananya! Don't let her—"

But Ananya's head remained bowed, her breath steady.

At last, after what felt like another eternity, the Dowager's voice echoed, cold as frost.

"You have endured waiting. That is something. But do not think yesterday's mirror makes you invincible. You come here today with purpose. Speak."

Ananya raised her head slowly, her eyes calm but steady. "This daughter-in-law humbly requests three days' leave, to return to her natal home and greet her family after the trial. I seek Mother's permission."

The Dowager's gaze sharpened. "Three days? You stand cleared before Heaven, yet you ask boldly, as though Heaven's favor has given you wings. Do you think the mirror's glow gives you freedom to come and go as you please?"

Ananya lowered her eyes, her voice firm but soft. "Heaven gave me breath another day. I wish to spend it honoring my family, so that when I serve this court, I may do so without shame."

The hall fell into silence again.

The Dowager tapped her fingers lightly against her armrest, her eyes never leaving Ananya. The weight of her scrutiny was like ice pressing against her chest.

Wei Rong muttered. "If she says no, I'll rattle her braziers till they fall."

Fen Yu bit her lip. "What if she refuses? What if she forbids her forever?"

Li Shen's calm voice cut through. "Patience. Listen. The Dowager always tests twice before she answers."

Chapter 17: dawager measure

The hall was so still that even the hiss of incense sounded loud.

The Dowager Empress stared at Ananya as if weighing every breath she dared to take. Her fan tapped lightly against her palm. "Three days," she repeated. "You ask boldly. Too boldly."

Ananya's voice stayed calm. "It is not boldness, Mother. It is duty. To show my face to the Lian ancestors now that I have endured the trial. If I do not, their spirits cannot rest in peace. A daughter who forgets her roots is unworthy to serve Your Majesty."

A faint scoff escaped the Dowager. "Hmph. So you speak of ancestors. Clever girl. Yet the palace is not a marketplace where one trades words for freedom."

Wei Rong muttered at Ananya's shoulder, "Marketplace? Old viper makes her sound like a hawker selling fish."

Fen Yu whispered nervously, "Don't talk so loud, she'll hear you!"

Li Shen, calm as always: "She tests. Let her finish."

The Dowager sipped her tea slowly, as if every pause stretched to break the younger woman's patience. "Very well. You may leave tomorrow at dawn. You will have two days, no more. You return before the second bell on the day after."

Ananya pressed her forehead to the ground. "This daughter-in-law thanks Mother's grace."

The Dowager's sharp voice cut across her words. "Do not thank too soon. There are conditions. You will travel in a plain carriage, with no banners, no music. Twelve guards, not one more. Grand Eunuch Gao will lead. No temples, no markets, no idle visits. You will not speak with officials, scholars, or outsiders. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

Wei Rong clenched his fists. "Two days with a leash around your neck! It's no leave at all."

Fen Yu pouted. "But at least she said yes. That's something..."

Li Shen murmured, "Wait. There is still room for more."

The Dowager leaned back in her seat, eyes cold. "And at your father's home—you receive only family. No private meetings, no whispers behind screens. If I hear a single rumor of disobedience, I will make you wish you never begged me."

Ananya lowered her head again, her voice quiet but steady. "Mother, I accept all conditions. But two days... my family waits for me, and my journey will take near a day itself. I would barely bow before my ancestors before turning back. Might Your Majesty grant me leave until the third morning? Only one more day, so I can fulfill both duty to family and duty to return rested and ready for Your service."

The air in the Phoenix Hall tightened. Even the servants froze, not daring to breathe.

Fen Yu gasped, "She's asking again? Oh heavens!"

Wei Rong swore softly, "Brave girl. Brave and mad."

Li Shen's lips curved faintly. "Watch. She will bend the ice, not break it."

The Dowager's eyes narrowed. "You argue?"

"No, Mother," Ananya said quickly. "I only beg for balance. To rush home, bow once, and rush back—it dishonors both you and my ancestors. But to spend a full day with them, to rest a night under their roof, and return at dawn on the third day... that would honor them properly, and let me serve you with a clear heart."

The Dowager studied her, tapping the fan against her chair. One beat. Two. Three. The silence dragged, heavy as stone.

Finally, the older woman gave a sharp, dry laugh. "Bold tongue. You risk much by asking twice. Most women in your place would crawl away thankful for two days."

Her gaze softened by a hair's breadth. "But... your words ring of duty, not indulgence. Fine. Three days. No more. You depart tomorrow at dawn, return by the first bell on the third morning. Fail me, and even Heaven's mirror will not shield you."

Ananya's voice held gratitude, but no trembling. "This daughter-in-law bows in thanks. I will not fail."

Wei Rong exhaled hard, muttering, "Ha! She bent the old viper after all."

Fen Yu spun in a delighted circle. "Three days, three days! We can eat cakes at her father's house!"

Li Shen inclined his head, quiet pride in his voice. "She has learned not only to endure silence, but to use it."

The Dowager flicked her sleeve. A maid stepped forward, carrying a tray: folded white silk, three candles, and a pouch of incense sealed with the phoenix emblem.

"These offerings go with you," the Dowager said. "They will be burned before the Lian ancestors. Let them remind you—when you kneel there, you kneel as the Emperor's consort. You carry this palace with you, whether you wish it or not."

Ananya bowed again, accepting the tray with both hands. "I understand."

"Good." The Dowager waved her hand dismissively. "Now leave. Before my patience grows thin."

Outside the Phoenix Hall

The moment the screens closed behind her, the air seemed lighter.

Fen Yu skipped beside her. "She said yes! And three days, not two! You're amazing!"

Wei Rong crossed his arms, still grumbling. "Three days shackled with rules. But still—better than two."

Li Shen smiled faintly. "The Dowager respects those who can bend without breaking. Today, she saw that in you."

Ananya allowed herself the smallest smile. "Then we pack. Tomorrow, we go home."

Chapter 18: homecoming under watch

Before the lamps guttered, Phoenix Hall was awake.

"Cloak," Su Mei whispered, settling winter-blue wool over Lian An's shoulders.

"Incense," another maid said, tucking the phoenix-sealed pouch into the travel chest.

Grand Eunuch Gao stood at the threshold with the pale light of false dawn behind him, breath fogging, a ledger under one arm. "Your Highness. The hour."

Lian An lifted the lacquered tray of offerings—white silk, three candles, the Dowager's incense—then glanced at her three shadows.

Fen Yu hovered so close she nearly put her chin on the tray. "We're really going? We're really going!"

Wei Rong checked the door as if he still had a sword. "I'll walk ahead. If anyone blinks wrong, I'll...growl very loudly."

Li Shen's smile was the quiet kind. "Do not trip on excitement, Fen Yu. Our dignity is already thin at this hour."

They stepped into the blue chill. The courtyard stones held last night's frost; the plain carriage waited with its shutters half-lowered and no ornament at all, exactly as the Dowager ordered. Twelve guards in dark coats flanked it, boots lined in neat pairs of six.

Gao bowed. "One carriage, two spare horses, inner road. No markets, no stops. We will make speed, not show."

"Thank you," Lian An said.

He met her eyes for a heartbeat and nodded toward the tray. "I will see these arrive unbroken."

They rolled out as the palace roofs caught the first silver edge of sun. No banners, no drums—only hoofbeats, the soft squeal of wheels, and Gao's occasional, perfectly timed cough when a servant stared too long. The city gates opened on a yawn of iron and old wood; cold air rushed in like a river.

Fen Yu pressed her nose to the shutter gap. "I forgot the world is so big."

Wei Rong rumbled, softer than usual. "It shrinks when you fight it. Grows when you go home."

Li Shen rested his elbow on nothing and looked out as if the horizon were a chessboard. "Two days there, one to breathe, home the third. The Dowager counts hours; we will count moments."

Lian An let the wheels hum through her bones, let the sky bleed from gray to milk-blue. Somewhere between city wall and low fields, the weight in her chest eased. She did not speak; she had nothing to barter for the feeling except silence.

Gao rapped the carriage frame lightly as they switched horses. "Halfway," he reported, as if announcing the weather. "We should make the Lian gates before the evening bell."

"Good," she said.

"Plain road, plain luck," he added, then resumed being made of angles and caution.

By late afternoon, the hills she knew—hers in this life and not—rose, layered like folded silk. The Lian residence walls appeared: austere gray, warm with age, the stone flecked with the same pale mica as her memory.

The guards changed formation. The carriage slowed. Gao's hand went up—neat, precise—and the gates opened.

The first thing she saw was her mother's sleeves.

Lady Xiu burst across the courtyard like a small spring storm, calling, "An'an!" in a voice that had cried itself hoarse just days before and still found more to spend. She stopped two paces short—remembering Gao, remembering rules—then bent, hands shaking, to touch her daughter's sleeve as if it might vanish.

"My girl," she breathed, tears already slipping, "my girl."

Lian An bowed properly first, like a good woman of the Inner Court, and then, as soon as etiquette had been appeased, stepped into her mother's arms and let herself be held. It was not like the past-life embrace she could never have again, and yet—her throat closed anyway.

"Mother," she managed, smiling into silk.

Duke Lian came slower, dignity intact, eyes bright in ways a duke's eyes should not be. "Your Majesty's Consort," he said for the guard's sake, and then, low enough for her alone, "My daughter."

Lian Hua barreled out next, braid half undone, cheeks pink. "Sister!" She skidded, remembered to bow, and then seized Lian An's hands with a joy that bounced. "You're here—you're really here—"

Gao cleared his throat. The sound tugged the courtyard back into order. "By Her Majesty the Dowager's decree, the Queen Consort will remain within the main hall or inner courtyard. Guests are to be received publicly. No temple visits, no markets."

Duke Lian bowed. "The Lian house understands. We thank the Dowager for her grace."

Gao's gaze flicked around, measuring, satisfied. "The offerings must be burned first." He stepped back, making himself invisible without moving at all.

They went in procession to the ancestral hall. Incense coiled in the dim like a remembered song. Lian An knelt. The white silk lay smooth beneath her palms; the three candles stood like simple oaths; the phoenix-sealed incense hissed when the match kissed it.

She bowed until her forehead touched the wooden step. "I come humbled and clean," she whispered to tablets who had never known her voice. "I stand by you now so I can stand straight when I serve elsewhere."

Fen Yu folded herself on the step, copying the bow, eyes huge. "Hello, Ancestors. We borrowed your daughter. We're looking after her, I promise."

Wei Rong stood behind her like a guard stationed by time. "You have a stubborn one. Good choice."

Li Shen saluted the tablets like fellow elders. "She learns quickly. Keep her safe when we cannot."

When the last curl of smoke thinned, Lady Xiu dabbed at her eyes and smiled a smile that made her younger. "Come. Inside. It's cold. And I—" she laughed, embarrassed by her own eagerness "—I told the kitchen not to make anything fancy because you never liked showy food."

"I don't," Lian An said, and her voice didn't wobble.

They sat in the great room that had held every Lian winter and summer. Curtains pulled back. A brazier glowed. Gao placed himself where he could see everyone and no one could pretend he was not there.

Dishes arrived that smelled like a life: ginger chicken cut small so chopsticks found it easy; tofu braised in a sauce the color of old amber; greens quick-fried with garlic and sesame; a clay pot of rice that had not been polished to death but still held the sweetness of grain.

Fen Yu drifted above the table with reverence. "Food that remembers your name," she sighed.

Wei Rong took a deep sniff. "I would haunt this pot for a month."

Li Shen gave the tofu a scholar's nod. "Well-tempered sauce."

"Eat," Lady Xiu said, piling Lian An's bowl as if anyone else might snatch it away. "Tell me if anything is wrong and I will scold the cook to tears."

"It's perfect," Lian An said, and meant the food, the room, the way her father kept pretending to adjust his sleeve to hide his emotion.

They ate like a family who had to be polite because of eyes and yet could not help being what they were.

Duke Lian set his chopsticks down. "We owe thanks," he said formally, glancing to Gao, to the guards just outside the door, to the air that would carry whatever it heard. "To the Emperor for declaring what Heaven had already shown. To the Dowager for this leave."

"We will pray for their health," Lady Xiu added, quick, sincere.

Lian Hua leaned forward, chin in hands, forgetting decorum and then remembering and sitting back up. "Sister, you looked like a mountain yesterday. Calm even when everyone was shouting."

"I was not calm," Lian An said wryly. "I was standing very still to keep my knees from giving out."

They laughed, quiet, as if laughter might spook the permission that allowed it.

Gao's voice slid softly into the space. "Her Highness will rest tonight. We depart on the morning of the third day at first bell. The Dowager expects punctuality."

"Of course," Duke Lian said. "We will not make you scold us, Chief Gao."

The old eunuch's mouth twitched a hair. "It is not my hobby."

Later, when the bowls were stacked and the brazier poked to a brighter glow, Lian An walked the inner courtyard with Lian Hua. The sky had deepened to ink; frost wrote delicate alphabets on the paving stones.

"Do you remember," Lian Hua said, "when we used to chase the cat until it hid in Father's study and Father pretended to be angry?"

"Mm," Lian An said, smiling. "And Mother gave us sesame buns to bribe forgiveness."

"We could ask for buns," Lian Hua suggested, very seriously. "To bribe the world."

From the shadowed veranda, Fen Yu whispered, "Yes. Bribe the world with buns. A sound plan."

Wei Rong snorted. "I prefer bribes that involve swords."

Li Shen folded his hands into his sleeves. "Bread and steel have their seasons."

They stopped beneath the old loquat tree whose bark Lian An's fingers remembered without having to look. Lian Hua glanced at the hall where Gao sat and lowered her voice to a conspirator's thread. "Will you be all right when you go back?"

"Yes," Lian An said. "No." She considered and chose truth. "I will be as all right as the palace allows. But I have you. That helps."

Lian Hua bumped her shoulder, a childish gesture sneaked into adult night. "You've always had me."

Inside, Duke Lian set a travel clock by the brazier, knowing he would wake before it, knowing he would not waste the time by sleeping through it. Lady Xiu folded and refolded a shawl for a daughter who had maids to do it for her and did it anyway.

When the house stilled, Ananya—Lian An—sat on the edge of the guest bed that had once been hers. She loosened her hair and let it fall; the weight eased something wordless in her spine.

Fen Yu sprawled backwards in midair and pretended to kick her feet. "Tomorrow we make sweets. Mother will hover and pretend not to taste the batter."

"We'll do the sesame buns," Lian An said, a smile in her voice. "Small ones. So we can bribe the world."

Wei Rong took his usual post by the door. "I'll bribe the guards by glaring until they think better of existing."

Li Shen's gaze traveled the ceiling beams, the joints that had held a family together for more seasons than he could name. "Three days," he said, mostly to himself. "Count them well."

Lian An lay back, the loquat shadow outside painting the paper screen. The house smelled of cedar and soy and the starch of fresh-washed cotton. For the first time in too long, the quiet did not feel like a trap.

"Good night," she said to the room, to her ghosts, to the girl who had once run this courtyard with a cat in her arms and crumbs on her face.

"Night!" Fen Yu sang.

"Hn," Wei Rong grunted, which for him was practically tenderness.

"Rest," Li Shen said, closing an invisible book.

In the outer hall, Gao counted breaths to the rhythm of a clock he had not wound; he did not sleep, but he did not frown either. Outside the wall, the world went on being large. Inside it, a small thing—three days—spread like warm tea through cold hands.

At dawn, they would knead dough. At noon, they would feed everyone who had fed them. At dusk, they would talk small talk that carried big love. And when the first bell of the third morning rang, she would stand, bow to the tablets one more time, and carry the warmth back into a palace that preferred marble.

For now, the house held her. And that was enough.

Chapter 19: the secret visit

The second morning of her stay at the Lian residence dawned clear and bright, the kind of morning that should have felt peaceful.

But even peace in a noble household could feel fragile—like porcelain, too easily cracked.

Ananya sat beneath the veranda, the scent of her mother's tea mingling with the warmth of the sun.

For the first time in months, she heard laughter—her sister's voice drifting from the courtyard, her mother calling out to the maids.

It should have comforted her.

But the stillness around her had weight. Something in the air had shifted.

Fen Yu lay sprawled on her stomach atop the low table, sighing dreamily. "It's so quiet here. No scheming concubines, no cold Emperor, no creepy eunuchs... just warmth."

Wei Rong snorted. "Don't get soft. Peace never lasts long when she's around."

Li Shen's fan flicked open with a soft snap. "He's not wrong."

Ananya smiled faintly. "You're both terrible omens."

Not far away, at the outer courtyard gate, a cloaked woman knelt on the stone path, her face pale beneath the morning light.

"I am Yao Qing," she said, voice trembling. "Please tell Her Highness the Queen Consort that I've come. I only need a few words."

Grand Eunuch Gao stood stiffly before the iron gate, expression as cold as the marble beneath his shoes.

"By order of the Dowager Empress, Her Highness receives no outside visitors," he said. "Especially not commoners."

"I am not a stranger!" Yao Qing cried, clutching her sleeve. "We were raised together—she would never turn me away!"

"The Dowager's word is law," Gao replied, not even glancing at her. "Go home, before I have the guards remove you."

The woman's voice cracked. "Please... just tell her I came."

But Gao had already turned, his steps soft and final. The gate slammed shut.

Near the eaves, Fen Yu, invisible to all, had been chasing dragonflies over the wall. She froze midair, her face falling as she watched the scene unfold.

When she darted back to the courtyard, her voice was sharp with outrage. "That awful bald frog turned your friend away!"

Ananya's hand stilled mid-tea pour. "What did you say?"

Fen Yu flailed dramatically. "Your friend! The one who used to sneak sweets to you when you were little! She was crying at the gate! Gao said the Dowager forbade anyone from seeing you."

Wei Rong cracked his knuckles. "If I still had fists, I'd punch that old snake."

Li Shen's eyes narrowed. "So the Dowager wants her isolated. No visitors, no whispers. Someone fears she might learn too much."

Ananya set the teapot down carefully. "Then we'll learn what they don't want us to."

That evening, after dinner, the lamps burned low in the Lian residence. The maids had withdrawn, and the halls had fallen into stillness.

Ananya called softly, "Lian Hua."

Her younger sister peeked into the room, her cheeks flushed from the kitchen's warmth. "Sister?"

"Do you remember my friend Yao Qing?"

Lian Hua nodded. "The merchant's daughter with the pretty braids? Of course."

"She came to see me today," Ananya said quietly. "The eunuch refused her at the gate. I need you to fetch her—discreetly."

Lian Hua blinked. "Fetch her? But the Dowager—"

"The Dowager forbade me," Ananya said with a faint smile. "She said nothing about you."

From above, Fen Yu twirled midair, grinning. "Oh, clever!"

Li Shen smirked faintly. "She's learning fast."

Wei Rong cracked a ghostly grin. "Finally, a plan worth watching."

Ananya took her sister's hands. "Use the back garden gate, the one by the mulberry hedge. Wait until the guards change. Bring her to the willow grove near the pond. Quietly."

Lian Hua's eyes gleamed with mischief. "It'll be our secret."

The garden shimmered beneath moonlight, silver dew glinting on the grass. The old willow tree swayed softly, its long branches brushing the pond's surface.

Ananya stood beneath its shadow, cloak drawn close. The ghosts lingered nearby, keeping watch.

Fen Yu whispered, "Two guards, ten paces away."

Wei Rong's grin widened. "I'll handle it."

Moments later, a clay pot crashed near the corridor. The guards jumped.

"What was that?!"

"Rats again?"

"No—too heavy!"

They ran off, shouting.

Fen Yu giggled behind her hand. "Brilliant!"

The gate creaked open. Lian Hua slipped in, guiding a veiled figure whose steps faltered.

"An'an," Yao Qing breathed, her voice breaking.

Ananya pulled her close, steadying her. "You shouldn't be here. What happened?"

Yao Qing lifted her head, and in the moonlight, her face looked hollow. "Everything. The Chen family destroyed us."

Ananya frowned. "How?"

"My father's office was seized," Yao Qing said, her words tumbling out. "They forged ledgers, accused him of stealing border grain. He tried to fight it, but no one dared speak for him. They took our house, our silver, even Mother's hairpins."

Her voice dropped to a trembling whisper. "And now—they've arranged to sell me as a concubine. To Lord Hui. He's old enough to be my grandfather."

Ananya's chest tightened. "They can't."

"They will, tomorrow morning."

For a moment, the night seemed to still. The rippling pond, the whispering willows—everything hushed.

Ananya took her friend's cold hands in hers. "You'll not go to him. I promise you."

Yao Qing's eyes shone with disbelief. "You can't stop them, An'an. You're in the palace now. You can't even step outside freely."

"Maybe not freely," Ananya said, her tone soft but sure. "But I still have reach."

From the shadows, Li Shen murmured, "She means the Duke."

Wei Rong smirked. "And the Emperor won't stay blind forever."

Yao Qing reached into her sleeve, pulling out a crumpled parchment sealed in fading red wax. "My father hid this before the officials came. It's a page from the Chen family's grain records—proof they diverted the shipments meant for the border. If the Emperor sees this, they'll fall."

Ananya's fingers brushed the paper, her heart pounding. "Then this stays with me. You'll go into hiding."

"I can't—"

"You must," Ananya said firmly. "Lian Hua will help you leave at dawn, through the silk traders' route. Go to the temple near the river—there's a widow there who shelters women. Stay quiet. Wait for my word."

Tears spilled down Yao Qing's cheeks. "An'an, if they find out—"

"Let them try."

Ananya tucked the ledger deep into her sleeve. "They've already taken your family's honor. I'll take their truth."

Chapter 20: the night of promise

The garden was still.

Even the crickets seemed to hold their breath after Yao Qing's confession.

Moonlight slid across the pond like silver silk, glinting on the single tear that trembled on Ananya's lashes.

She tightened her grip on her friend's cold hands. "You won't marry that man. I won't allow it."

Yao Qing shook her head, voice trembling. "An'an... they'll sell me by dawn. My father has no power left, and Mother can't stop them."

"You'll not return to that house tonight."

Her friend blinked. "Then where will I go?"

Ananya glanced at the shadows where her ghosts hovered unseen. "Someplace no one thinks to look — among noise, not silence."

Fen Yu tilted her head, whispering to Li Shen, "She's planning again. That look means trouble."

Li Shen murmured, "No, that look means she's building hope out of nothing."

Ananya drew a steady breath. "Listen to me, Qing'er. I have silver, enough to rent a small shop — maybe near the spice market by the west gate. You and I will open something together. Quietly. It will be under your name, not mine."

Yao Qing stared at her, disbelief flickering through fear. "A shop? Now? You're a queen, and I—"

"A woman with talent and two hands," Ananya said softly. "That's enough. We'll start small, with food and tea. No one will question two women selling warmth in a cold world."

"But you're bound by palace law—"

Ananya smiled faintly. "The palace doesn't own my heart or my past. I know what I can hide."

She squeezed her friend's hands again. "Meet me tomorrow at the morning market. After the first bell. Bring only what you can carry."

Yao Qing hesitated. "An'an, what if they follow me?"

"Then you'll pretend to sell incense for the temple," Ananya said. "I'll find you near the spice stalls. Fen Yu and the others will keep the eyes away."

At her name, Fen Yu puffed up proudly. "Finally, a mission!"

Wei Rong muttered, "And risk another porcelain pot flying over a guard's head."

Ananya ignored them both, her gaze steady on her friend. "Do you trust me?"

Yao Qing nodded slowly, tears shining again. "Always."

"Then don't lose that faith," Ananya whispered. "Not tonight."

She slipped the folded ledger page back into her sleeve and touched Yao Qing's cheek. "Go now, before the patrol returns. Lian Hua will take you through the servants' path. Rest in the old temple by the market wall — I'll find you there when dawn breaks."

Yao Qing's voice broke. "You still sound like the girl who used to dream about feeding half the city."

Ananya smiled, her eyes soft in the moonlight. "Maybe I still will."

When Yao Qing and Lian Hua vanished into the mist, the garden fell silent again.

The wind tugged gently at Ananya's cloak, carrying the faint fragrance of night jasmine.

Fen Yu floated beside her, whispering, "Do you think this will work?"

"It has to," Ananya murmured. "She deserves to live without begging for mercy."

Li Shen's tone was thoughtful. "Dreams born in darkness burn brightest, if they survive till morning."

Ananya looked toward the dim horizon where the first edge of dawn was still hidden.

"Then we'll wait for morning," she said softly, "and build something the Dowager can't destroy."

The ghosts hovered quietly around her, their forms glimmering faintly in the pale light — silent witnesses to the promise of two women against a kingdom.